

DCI
10 June 86

SUBJECT: Can the Nicaraguan Resistance Win?

Yes, the Nicaraguan resistance can win. But its victory is not likely to be achieved on the battlefield. Rather, an organized campaign of political action, propaganda, and paramilitary activities can bring the Sandinistas to choose between a collapse of their government or honoring their commitments to the OAS to establish a democracy in 1979.

During the debate on the renewal of aid to the Nicaraguan resistance, we hear it has been said that there is no way the United States could ever match the weapons and the guidance the Soviets and Cubans have provided the Sandinista regime.

This is a vast misconception. There is no need to match Soviet and Cuban forces and billions of dollars worth of sophisticated weapons. Far fewer people and weapons are needed to pressure an oppressive regime than to protect it. We see the Angolan regime, with about 150,000 regular troops and 35,000 Cuban and Soviet troops, beleaguered by a much smaller force with external funding.

To think that the insurgents will have to defeat the government's military is to ignore history and the way revolutions and insurgencies work. Who would think Washington's tiny ragtail army of a few thousand would have been able to drive the largest expeditionary force and the strongest army in the 18th century out of America.

The resistance is not seeking a classic, definitive military victory. Insurgency is a protracted conflict, involving a number of stages and pursued through a variety of tactics. A full-blown offensive is not required; insurgents can pick their opportunities to strike at vulnerable strategic targets. A government's economic infrastructure--transportation networks, electrical power systems, industrial plants--is particularly difficult to secure. Small-scale attack and tactics gradually erode the stability and will of the government. This pattern was demonstrated in the Vietnamese communists' long campaign against Saigon.

In Uganda the recent success of Musaveni--who led a small resistance movement against a government force six times its size and succeeded without fighting a major engagement--showed the vulnerability of brutal, corrupt governments. In the case of Algeria in the late 1950s, and South Yemen in the 1960s, neither Paris nor London had the perseverance or domestic support to continue their counterinsurgency efforts and had to withdraw their forces.

External material support and international recognition of a resistance are critical factors in most successful insurgencies. The Sandinistas' own victory was achieved in large measure through Cuban advice, training, arms and funds. International pressure was a key factor in bringing about the negotiations between the white regime and the insurgents in Rhodesia which ultimately led to peaceful insurgent victory.

Withdrawal of external support can destroy or greatly diminish an insurgency's capabilities. We saw this in the Philippines, where the communist Chinese withdrew support from the Huks during 1946-54; in Venezuela, where Cuba, after becoming disillusioned with the insurgents in the mid-1960s, withdrew support; and in Greece, where Tito terminated support for the Greek insurgents and closed the Yugoslav borders in the late 1940s. When the US stopped its support of the National Front for the Liberation of Angola following the Clark Amendment in 1975, the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola quickly gained power with the help of massive Soviet aid and support.

History shows that progressive withdrawal of domestic support for the government and gradual erosion of international support for the government is what brings down or alters oppressive governments. This process is under way in Nicaragua. The insurgents have made gains among rural peasants who resent agricultural collectivization and resettlement programs as well as the government's mandatory military draft and anti-church policies. The heavy financial burden of the counterinsurgency effort--about half of the Nicaraguan budget last year--combined with poor economic management has created mounting discontent with the Sandinista regime.

The Sandinistas must be deeply concerned that they have not been able to match the success of earlier new Marxist-Leninist regimes. Castro was able to eliminate virtually all internal opposition in Cuba within the first two years. Within two and one-half years of Selassie's overthrow in Ethiopia, Mengistu had consolidated power, severed relations with the United States, and begun receiving Soviet military support. But after almost seven years in power, the Sandinistas--faced with a continuing insurgency that enjoys only very modest US support--have not been able to consolidate and eliminate their opposition.

US support of insurgent movements fighting Marxist-Leninist regimes must be seen in the context of countering greater Soviet subversive involvement in the Third World. Despite the regimes they installed in Afghanistan, Angola, Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Nicaragua, the Soviets now find themselves supporting a Marxist-Leninist government that is combatting an insurgency. The cost of this to Moscow and its allies is considerably greater than the cost to the West of aiding the insurgents. In El Salvador, for example, a low-level US commitment in support of the government has been a major factor in reversing the fortunes of Nicaraguan and Cuban-backed insurgents. By requiring Moscow to counter multiple insurgencies, the risks and costs to Moscow are increased substantially, alternatives to Soviet domination are kept alive in Third World arenas, and Marxist-Leninist regimes in countries such as Nicaragua are prevented from quickly consolidating their revolution.

With modest assistance, the Nicaraguan resistance will demonstrate that the Sandinistas are incapable of providing for the basic needs of the population. The resistance force can create political circumstances and pressure to require the Sandinistas to reach a political accommodation with the resistance and restoring basic democratic freedoms.

There is a proven formula for insurgent and political action against repressive and vulnerable governments. It can be applied successfully in Nicaragua if resolve and renewed support can be mustered before the resistance is allowed to wither away and before the Marxist regime is allowed to irreversibly entrench itself in Managua.